

## Letters

### Ethical questions about peer review

SIR

Your editorial in the March 1992 issue (1), is in my opinion something of a landmark – and a positive, favourable one – in the history of scholarly communication. In effect, you are urging the medical research community to take seriously a paper that leading peer review authorities rejected (for one reason or another) for publication. The peer review authority rejection might be characterised as having been made on a wholesale basis, and you yourselves were recently part of this rejection effort.

At the same time, I feel that a very serious ethical question regarding peer review and scholarly communication remains unanswered. Therefore, I respectfully request the editors of the *Journal of Medical Ethics* to include, as an extension of – or part of – this letter to the editor, the 'open letter' of January 31, 1992 regarding JME editorial policy in relation to the rejection of articles that will result in the saving of millions of lives.

#### Reference

- (1) Gillon R. A startling 19,000-word thesis on the origin of AIDS: should the JME have published it? *Journal of medical ethics* 1992; 18: 3-4.

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### Open letter

SIR

As part of my studies of peer review and scholarly communication, I consider

this letter to be an open letter to you and to scholars interested in problems of scholarly communication. Also, I intend to write an article based on the contents of this letter (and also based on your replies to inquiries made in this letter).

Recently, the *Journal of Medical Ethics* rejected – via your rejection letter of 27th May 1991 – a manuscript submitted for publication in your journal and subsequently published as a monograph elsewhere (1). The main reason for rejection, as stated in your letter, regarded length. The manuscript was too long, in your opinion. You emphasised the problem of length, and emphasised your negative decision regarding the manuscript, by writing: 'There is just no way that I can publish a 19,000-word paper (even if I thought that it was going to save millions of lives...)'.

I would like to analyse and discuss this statement of yours within the following contexts of peer review and scholarly communication:

- 1) The question of just what you really 'can' or cannot do. (In this case, the word 'you' refers to the *Journal of Medical Ethics*, to you personally as editor, and to you (plural) who comprise the editorial leadership of the journal, including the chairman of the board, consulting editors, etc.)
- 2) The ethical ramifications of your statement in relation to the traditional ethical tenets of the medical profession.
- 3) The question of accountability, or responsibility, towards the journal's readers, towards the medical research community – and the medical profession as a whole, and towards the human race.

First of all, just so there is no misunderstanding, the discussion does not concern whether the article in question would have saved millions of

lives or not. Instead, the discussion revolves around your on-the-record statement that if this article you rejected, or any other article of 19,000 words submitted to you, would save millions of lives, you would reject the articles because they were too long.

Regarding what you can or cannot do (item 1), I think it is nonsense, and a false statement, to state that you cannot publish an article of 19,000 words if such an article would save millions of lives. Some journals publish articles of a page or two in length, and some journals publish articles much longer than 19,000 words in length. In effect, limitations for length are arbitrary and artificial limitations set by editorial decision. In fact, whenever you receive an article of 19,000 words that will 'save millions of lives' by virtue of its publication, I feel you can do the following:

- a) Include the article in the next issue of your journal, even if it means making the issue larger than usual, and even if it means a 'hold the presses' situation.
- b) Create a special issue of your journal, devoted to saving millions of lives, based on the article that will save millions of lives, with editorial comment, and comment by authorities and experts in the field, on just how the article will save millions of lives.
- c) Hold a press conference before publication, in which you announce publication, and in which you announce how the publication will save millions of lives. (I think such action by a journal similar to the *Journal of Medical Ethics*, in the cases of Semmelweis and childbirth fever, and Beuperthuy and yellow fever, could have saved at least thousands of lives.)

Regarding ethical ramifications (item 2), I think your statement has such vast